AN AVERAGE MAN

BY

REV. THOMAS VAN NESS

THE SECOND CHURCH IN BOSTON

1898

AN AVERAGE MAN.

A LENTEN DISCOURSE.

He also that had received two talents came and said, Lord, thou deliveredst unto me two talents: behold I have gained two other talents besides them. — MATT. XXV. 22.

As we read over this parable of the talents our attention scarcely dwells on the middle character, — the man with two talents. He seems but a lay figure thrown in between to bring out more strongly the contrast between the extremes, — the man with five talents and the man with the one; yet I am inclined to suspect that this seemingly neutral and colorless person is the one most important for our consideration, because he represents the average individual, who, while not intrusted with great wealth or brilliant opportunities, is nevertheless not cut off from all opportunity nor shut out from every field of venture.

Here in America the "average man" is in the majority and few belong to any other category. Some day it flashes upon most of us that we belong to that vast majority. It is a critical moment when the realization is forced home to our minds. Up to that time we have been so full of ambition or conceit as to believe our powers unlimited and everything possible. We have given to our hearts all sorts of excuses for still being unknown or in a minor position. "Wait," we have said; "our time will come; we are not yet old enough;

the opportunity has not presented itself. When it does, then we shall astonish the world, we shall do great things, take high rank, be known to every one."

Something or other happens, — the promotion of a younger friend over us, the failure of our great attempt at public speaking, the inability to win in a certain law case, the quiet ignoring of our presence at a social function where we had expected to shine, — something or other, I say, of this kind, perhaps, suddenly brings to our minds — and with such stunning force as nearly to daze and cripple us — the knowledge that we are simply one of the crowd and rated by our fellows as only fair to average.

In that bewildering hour when a man first wakes to the actual estimate which others have of him, what pain he suffers! From over-confidence he is likely to swing to over-timidity; from having too much push to having too little push. The ambition, the enthusiasm, seems to ooze out as he recognizes himself to be an ordinary man, and discouragement or envy is likely to usurp the place of former confidence and vanity.

Now it is just at this point — at this serious hour — that the average man stands most in need of encouragement, yet is least likely to get it. If in this moment of weakness he confides to a friend that he really thought some day or other his poetry would take rank with that of Tennyson, he is almost sure to be laughed at; if he mentions his surprise that a younger man was preferred before him, he is coolly asked what else he expected. Sympathy for his early ambitions and dreams he must not look for. Had he failed utterly, had he through sickness or accident lost all, his case might call forth pity; or had he, through his brilliancy or keenness, made a great success, he might expect applause, but neither to fail nor to succeed, to come in somewhere among the crowd, to take a middle position

neither very good nor very bad, how can he suppose his case will awaken interest, or call forth commendation? Alas! his case is all too common. He is just one of the people, an all-around average person, and that's the end of it.

No, that should not be the end of it in spite of the world's verdict. There is a deeper question to be answered, and that is, is he never to be anything more than middle class, or does it still depend upon himself whether he will rise above or fall below the undistinguished plane?

What is it that brings a man to this sense of incapacity? What causes him to conclude that, after all, his personality, his mental power, is not what he dreamed? Has earth, air, sea or sky changed in any manner their relations to him? No. Have the inward life-currents given out, the nerve centres weakened? No. The realizing sense of littleness, of limitation may have come just in the moment when he felt he was putting forth his best powers. For that very reason, alas! he perceives in so startling a way that he can lay the blame of his failure upon no outside thing, no temporary sickness or want of chance. No; he simply failed because, as his mortified pride now seems to incessantly whisper, he was not big enough, not bright enough, not strong enough, not valuable enough. His shrunken and contracted estimate of himself, then, comes purely from his discovery of the aspect he presents to others of his kind, their opinion of him, their judgment concerning him, their conclusion about him. His youthful estimate of himself was one thing; the world's estimate of him is quite a different thing. Yes; but — and here is the vital question — is the world's estimate of him any truer, any more to be relied upon than his original estimate of himself? If the one was distorted, how about the other? If the world says he is average, is he there-

fore average? If neither estimate is just and accurate, how is the right estimate to be obtained?

First, let us see that the point of view from which each estimate is made up is a partial one.

Why does public sentiment rate the two-talent man as an average person? In what way does it arrive at its judgment?

Surely not from a knowledge of the early hopes and ambitions of the two-talent man. No. These are not known, and if known are likely to cause ridicule. The world has eyes simply for surface indications. What it wants of the social converser is brilliancy; of the lawyer, keenness; of the public speaker, magnetism; of the Irish hod-carrier, muscle. The world is not interested in that part of the man's nature which is *below* the surface and cannot be put to utilitarian use. For public ends and industries there is but a small part of a man's whole nature that is utilizable, — the part which is called the *practical* part. "Like some beautiful esculent plant of which only a hundredth part is edible and that part is cut out and called valuable while the rest is flung away, — although the discarded part may have in itself what is vastly more wonderful, even though it is called useless because it fails to serve for food, — so a man is estimated and valued in the community chiefly for what he can do along certain lines of thought and action." The two-talent man's *external* and world-wise faculties are what count in the market-place, i. e., his co-operation in industry, his conformity to certain customs, his intelligence in practical affairs, his powers of push and capacity to strike a good bargain. All praise for such things. But you know and I know, my friends, that success in trade, in politics, brilliancy in literature and in writing, ability in managing commercial institutions is, after all, but a poor and shallow expression of what is far deeper, the unre-

corded and unspoken pains and aspirations of the struggling soul. "Watch closely enough your own thoughts and feelings and inward experiences, and observe that not even your nearest friend, your wife, your child, shares the largest part of your life, — knows or can know what after all makes up you and your individual history.

So, then, if other men rank you as average, they so rank you not because of their complete knowledge of your nature, but simply on account of their acquaintance with a very limited part of your being, — that part which shows itself in practical activity. On the other hand, your individual estimate of yourself in early youth was equally wrong; for while you possessed many of the needful qualities of heart, mind and soul, yet these were not given you in that proportion which makes them *practically* utilizable. No one attribute, possibly, dominated to a sufficient degree, or each in its turn lacked the needed discipline, and could not be made sufficiently effective at the proper moment. Here was your mistake, — what your acquaintances called your conceit; you were right in feeling capable of great things, but they too were right in knowing that great things were not possible from one with so undisciplined a nature, or from one who, because he was such a handy Jack-at-all-trades, was never likely to become master of any one.

Coming back now to our parable of the talents.

We can well imagine the surprise and disappointment of the second servant when his employer hands out to him but two pieces of money. Up to that time he had no reason to suppose there was any difference between him and his fellow-servants. In his own estimation he probably stood upon the same level of capacity and capability with the one who is now intrusted with more than double the amount of money. Why such discrimination?

Because, as can be plainly seen by this act, his lord and master considers him but an average man, and treats him as such. Here, then, is the world-verdict. Shall he accept it as the true one or not?

What, from the servant receiving the five talents, is the most that can be expected? A hundred per cent return, — the doubling of his money. If the average man can do equally well, is he not entitled to precisely the same reward? Yes, surely. It is not, then, the amount of capital, note you, which determines a man's future position, but the *way* he uses what is given, i. e., what he makes of the things — mental, moral, practical — which are intrusted to him.

Here is the first encouragement to us who consider ourselves but average. It is really left with us to prove whether the enduring, the permanent estimate which God shall place upon us is to be that of the world or something higher.

The next encouraging thing about the parable is the fact that the basis of judgment is changed. The first judgment was passed on what I called, a little while ago, a man's practical faculties, — that side of him which, small though it may be, the community can use and receive benefit from, — the last judgment is to be passed on something quite different, — on the proportional increase each is able to make on what is intrusted to him.

The first estimate we are not accountable for; the last estimate does, however, depend entirely upon ourselves.

Do I make my meaning clear? If not, let me restate it in different form.

I am not to blame if, because the world wants strong men and my muscular strength is limited, I am classed by the world simply as average; nor am I to be censured if, because the world wants quickness of wit or keenness of perception, I fail to have them in pre-eminent

degree; but I am to be justly condemned if, possessing average strength or fair mental ability, I do not proportionally make as much of them as the man who has double my muscular power and thrice my intellectual attainments.

How shall I make the most of what I have? How shall I double my mental, moral or spiritual stock?

"PLAINLY, ACCORDING TO JESUS, BY *use.*"

Paradoxical as it sounds, the more we expend, the more we have; the more we give, the more we receive.

The gymnast pulling and tugging at rope and chest weight becomes so tired and exhausted that he can exercise no more, but in the very giving out of his strength he has increased his capacity of physical endurance. Every man is aware of the fact that if he wants to know more he must put to use what he already knows. Tell a good story to a friend, and afterwards it is yours; keep it to yourself, and it is soon forgotten and cannot be recalled. So in countless other things.

It may then be laid down as an axiom that if one wishes to get, he must give; if he desires to grow, he must use that which is already his.

Giving and using must become habits.

Here is the first distinguishing difference between the average man and the great man; for, as George Eliot says, genius is only an infinite capacity for hard work. Think of Shakespeare giving forth to the world play after play, any one of which, if he had written no more, would have made him immortal! Think of the volumes and volumes written by Ruskin, by Herbert Spencer, by Bacon. Recall how Edison produces and perfects invention after invention. Remember the sonatas, operas and musical dramas composed by the giants, Beethoven and Wagner, and you will realize

the stupendous industry of those master minds. Constant use, that is it; the giving forth of what we have is the indispensable requisite to further growth and improvement.

Now in all of us there is a certain faculty which varies very greatly in strength and intensity. It is the faculty of effort; and my first injunction is, Keep this faculty alive and growing by a little gratuitous exercise every day, — i. e., be systematically heroic or generous in what seem some little unnecessary points.

It is late in the evening. You are tired and sleepy. The note of acknowledgment, the letter of congratulation, can wait until to-morrow to be answered: *Sit down at once and answer it.* . . . On the whole, you would rather not call upon your near neighbor who has just moved into the house above; you prefer not to accept the invitation to Mrs. So-and-So's tea; you fear it will prove a bore: *Put on your bonnet and coat and call at once. Accept graciously and without demur the undesired invitation.* It seems unnecessary for you to drop anything into the collection box for missionary work. If you do not give to the American Unitarian Association or to the Industrial Home who will know it? You think, therefore, that you might just as well save the five or ten dollars. *Contribute at once double the amount originally in your mind.* If you do not, you lose something within of far more value than many dollars.

. . . . . .

The second maxim I should lay down is this. Until the new habit of generosity or industry or dutifulness becomes fixed, never suffer an exception to occur.

Says Professor James: "When you are trying to acquire a new habit each lapse is like the letting fall of a ball of string which you are carefully winding up; a single slip undoes more than a great many turns will wind up again." Professor Bain, writing in the same

vein, adds these confirmatory words: "The peculiarity of the moral habit is the presence of two hostile powers, one to be gradually raised into the ascendant over the other. It is necessary above all things in such a situation *never to lose a battle.*"

The third way I should say to increase our moral capacity is to act *immediately* on every good resolution and upon every right emotional prompting.

On Sunday morning there comes to you the suggestion of attending church. Instead of immediately acting upon it and commencing to get ready, you decide first to look over the morning paper or chat awhile about household affairs. Becoming interested in your chat or in the news, the time passes. On the whole it seems easier to stay at home, and you are confirmed in the opinion by the forbidding character of the skies. You won't miss much, you say, by not going. No, perhaps not, at the church; but you are missing what is of far more value, the chance of gaining additional moral fibre. By that failure of yours to act on your first noble prompting, you are weaker by so much in steadiness of purpose. Say to yourself, on the other hand, "For these six Sundays of Lent I am going to attend church promptly and regularly," and then *do it;* and at the end of the time, if you have gained nothing from the preacher, you have gained in a tightening of moral fibre, in a strength of will which in larger things may prove of greatest benefit.

So I should also recommend you during Lent to read some one good and noble book for at least a half-hour every day. No matter what the interruptions, no matter how late the hour when you get home, no matter how weary the body, read for that prescribed half-hour; and when Easter comes you will be master not simply of the author's thought, but, what is of more importance, you will be master of a *habit* which has

strengthened and will strengthen your powers of mental application, your industry and your literary appreciation.

. . . . . .

I notice that the man in the parable did not sit down and enviously complain, because he was given less than one-half as much as his fellow-servant; he did not talk of equality and common ownership and unfair discrimination, and raise an agitation which should compel his seemingly fortunate companion to divide with him. No; he simply went to work to do with his two talents precisely as much as could the man with five talents, — that is, *double* them.

. . . . . .

"There is not to-day a more inspiring sight," as has truly been said, "than to see a man start in life with what is called ordinary capacity, and to see his power grow and grow out of his consecration." Average gifts, *persistently* used, yield rich returns.

Gibbon was considered an average writer, a mere drudge, — a two-talent man. He worked twenty years on one book, but it lives. To-day Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" is the standard text-book on that subject. Noah Webster, we are told, was not considered an extraordinary man by his fellow-townsmen. He too gave years to one book, — thirty-six years I believe, — but his dictionary will live. Newton, whom we now class as a genius, was not so rated when he lived. His book, "Chronology of Ancient Nations," he rewrote fifteen times before giving it to the public. Average gifts these men were supposed to have. Yet now we call them great because each in his turn doubled his talents, used to the utmost his moderate capacities.

Oh, my friends! let us not blame Fate, environment, circumstances or any other exterior condition, and assert that we cannot rise or be anything better,

nobler, sweeter, grander than what we now are. By no mere outer accident of fortune are we to be finally judged, but by what we make of that which is actually intrusted to us. If we remain underlings, the fault is not in our stars, but in ourselves.

Realize, then, as you have never done before, your possibilities. From now and on call yourself no more "average." In the light of the eternal glory which may be yours, your life passes out of insignificance and commonplace. It takes on an added dignity and value. According to the world's standards you may not have much, but the proper use of that which you do have is essential to the well-being of all humanity. Yes, to you is given an indestructible part, a soul infinitely more precious than any earthly thing. Though the heavens be rolled up like a scroll, and the stars cease to give their light, the humblest soul shall still survive and abide, if righteous, in the everlasting love of the Father.

With such your destiny, if you will have it so, go forth to to-morrow's toil or play, to its cares, to its joys, or to its sorrows and its pains, determined to loyally fulfil the mission of your life, — to double the gifts and faculties intrusted to you, — to enlarge your soul. Then, believe me, when the end on earth shall come; to your knock as to that of any other well-lived life, the great gates, the everlasting doors shall spring wide open, and there too on the very threshold shall stand one whose love shall welcome you with the "Well done." Because thou hast been faithful over the few things I will make thee ruler over many. Enter thou forever into the joys of the Lord God Eternal.